



SIKH INTERFAITH COUNCIL OF VICTORIA Inc



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Report from Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria (SICV) on the Parliament of the World's Religions 2009, Melbourne

More than 200 Sikhs from all over the world (including India, United States of America, Canada, Europe, and Australia) participated in the Parliament of the World's Religions held December 3-9, 2009 in Melbourne, Australia. About 5,000 persons from more than 200 faiths from 80 countries across the world attended the event.

The theme of the Parliament was **Make a World of Difference: Hearing Each Other, Healing the Earth**. It was organized by the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (CPWR) based in Chicago. Representatives of diverse world religions addressed the conference on the problems of the world like poverty, ignorance, crisis of ethics, and environmental concerns.



PWR logo

The Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria (SICV) was officially appointed by CPWR in 2007, when Melbourne won the bid to host the Parliament, to promote and garner global Sikh involvement in the event. SICV communicated with all the key Sikh organisations worldwide to encourage them to submit their proposals for presenting at the Parliament and then did the assessment and recommendations of proposals for the intrafaith, interfaith, engagement and open space sessions.

Over the two year lead up to the Parliament, SICV executive members also served as active members on the Advisory Panel, Program Selections Committee, Community Outreach Committee, Security and Protocol Committee and Arts and Culture Committee. SICV was responsible for preparing all the Sikh related material for distribution through an exhibition booth and matching overseas delegates for homestay programs with local host families. A number of youths were recruited to serve as volunteers to help out in various roles on the Parliament events.

SICV worked with the Victorian Police and Australian Customs authorities over the two years to secure free access for kirpan wearing Sikhs into the Convention Centre and other high security areas. Prior to the Parliament, SICV worked closely with the Victorian Government to secure an amendment to the Control of Weapons Act to include an exemption for the Kirpan. This was considered a great achievement over the previous Parliament in Barcelona where kirpan-wearing Sikhs had to demonstrate and organise sit-ins in order to get approval to enter the venue.

A key highlight of the Parliament was the Communities Night program when each faith community honoured its delegates and provided an opportunity for overseas delegates to meet with the local community members. The Sikh Communities Night function was held at the Craigieburn Gurdwara Sahib on December 4 which was attended by overseas Sikh and non-Sikh delegates.



Sikh Communities Night at Craigieburn Gurdwara Sahib

Organisations that sent representatives to the Parliament included the World Sikh Council – America Region (WSC-AR), Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (SGPC), Gurmat Sangeet Project, Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, Institute for Understanding Sikhism, International Fateh Academy, International Institute of Gurmat Studies, Nanakshahi Trust, Palatine Gurdwara Sahib Chicago, Sikh Council of Australia, Sikh Educational and Religious Foundation, Sikh Youth Federation, 3HO, and United Sikhs.

Sikhs were involved in interfaith, intra-faith, and engagement sessions as well as morning religious observances. The plenary sessions also included visible Sikh presence and participation.



Sikh presenters at the Parliament

Sikh intra-faith sessions were held on the following topics:

- Interfaith understanding in Sikh history and theology (Balwant Singh Hansra - USA, Harnam Singh Shan - India, Sangat Singh Syalee - USA, Devinder Singh Chahal - Canada, Rajinder Singh Mago - USA)
- Principles and articles of the Sikh faith (Ranbir Singh Sandhu - USA, Kuldeep Singh - USA, Gurbax Singh Gulshan - UK, Mejinderpal Kaur - UK)
- Preservation of Sikh heritage (Balwant Singh Dhillon - India, Davinderpal Singh - India, Balvinder Singh - India, Sarbpreet Singh - USA)
- Sikh youth perspectives (Jasjit Singh - Australia, Jessie Kaur - USA, Gural Singh - Australia)
- Gender equality in Sikh faith (Amrit Kaur Vasha - Australia, Gurbux Kaur Kahlon - USA)
- Sikh diaspora and global Sikh community (Kuldeep Singh - USA, Gurbax Singh Gulshan - UK, Ranbir Singh Sandhu - USA, Ajmer Singh Gill - Australia)



Left: Gurbax Kaur Kahlon (WSC-AR) addresses President Jimmy Carter panel on equality for women and girls, Right: Valarie Kaur, Director of Divided We Fall screened the film at the Parliament

Sikh speakers also presented papers in several interfaith and engagement sessions, including:

- President Jimmy Carter, Nobel Laureate, panel on equality for women and girls
- Creative methodologies for interreligious dialogue
- Religion's imperative to present "the other" faithfully
- Talking about my generation
- Does the media have faith?
- Honoring the sacred feminine
- Search for inner peace
- The importance of family
- Interreligious dialogue making a world of difference to establish peace: Sikh perspective
- Ecological wisdom: Towards a sustainable and peaceful ecology
- Developing a dynamic interfaith movement for your city
- Sharing resources in an increasingly globalized world
- Democracy and diversity in global perspective
- Sacred sites
- Global ethics and religion forum
- Breaking barriers: Global women of faith
- Educating religious leaders for a multi-faith world
- Strangers in a strange land: Integration of religious minorities into Australia
- Experience the women's interfaith network
- Rivers of life: Community, water, and spirit in Australia
- Voices of peace: Models for productive coexistence among youth
- Faith, culture, and policing: The Victorian experience



Left: Tejdeep Kaur and Kuldeep Singh (of Sikh Youth Federation) were panelists on "Talking About My Generation" session, Right: Archbishop Phillip Freier, Dr. Tarunjit Singh Butalia (WSC-AR), and Roop Singh (SGPC) at the closing ceremony

A highlight of the Parliament for the Sikh community was an International Sikh Consultation by WSC-AR convened as a formal Parliament session on December 7. About 100 Sikhs from across the world gathered to discuss issues with regard to developing an international Sikh representative structure / organization that discourages individual personal leadership. The session was moderated by Dr. Ranbir Singh Sandhu, founding Secretary General of WSC-AR. The need for an international representative Sikh

organization was unanimously agreed upon and consultations within countries with a significant Sikh Diaspora presence will be pursued with the objective of having an organizational structure in place by the time the next parliament is convened in 2014.



International Sikh Consultation

Some of the other highlights of the Parliament were as follows:

- The screening of the movie "Divided We Fall" with Director Valarie Kaur at the Parliament on December 5.
- A highlight of the World Sacred Music Concert on December 6 was a Shabad (verse from Sikh scripture set to its original raag) sung by Bhai Kultar Singh Jatha (of Delhi, India) before thousands gathered at the evening event.
- Mr. Roop Singh, Additional Secretary of the SGPC travelled from Amritsar, India to Melbourne, Australia to address the closing ceremony (on December 9) on behalf of Jathedar of Sri Akal Takhat Sahib. He shared the message of Giani Gurbachan Singh, Jathedar of Siri Akal Takhat Sahib, and said "On the auspicious occasion of the Parliament of the World's Religions that is being held in Melbourne, I have brought for the entire humanity a message of mutual respect and universal brotherhood from Sri Harmandar Sahib, Sri Amritsar, the holy place of worship for all and the centre for the betterment of humanity."



Bhai Kultar Singh Jatha at World Sacred Music Concert

Sikh Missionary Centre USA and other organizations provided books, CDs and brochures on the Sikh faith, which were distributed during the Parliament at the educational booth set up by the SICV along with locally produced materials.



SICV Exhibition booth at the Parliament

SICV sponsored several Sikh youth representatives to participate in the Parliament and assisted some overseas delegates with their travel costs.

World Sikh Council – America Region (WSC-AR) which has 3 members on the Board of Trustees of CPWR worked closely with SICV Planning Committee to ensure there was Sikh participation at all levels of the Parliament.



Roop Singh (SGPC) addresses the Closing Plenary

The WSC-AR in collaboration with SICV plans to publish a copy of the Sikh proceedings of the Parliament in 2010. The publication will include peer reviewed papers presented by Sikhs at the Parliament.

SICV is deeply grateful to the entire Victorian Sikh community for their generous donations and tremendous show of support to enable Sikhs to participate in the Parliament.

Donations collected were used for the following purposes:

- Airfares for Bhai Kultar Singh Ji's jatha
- Registration fees for selected overseas Presenters
- Registration fees for Victorian Sikh Youth delegates
- Exhibition booth rental and fit out
- Design and printing of 11 new brochures on Sikhism
- Production of Simran CDs and Sri Guru Granth Sahib CDs
- Buses and car rental
- Organisation of the Communities Night program
- Siropas for Presenters at Communities Night program
- Souvenir gifts for all overseas delegates
- Courier services
- Photography services

Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria
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